Fundamental Guidelines for PowerPoint

When you've reached the last step of AIMC—that is, once you've analyzed your audience, identified your intent, and decided on the components of your message—you need to choose the channels through which your message will be best communicated. As a reminder, the three potential channels are (1) you (your voice and body movements), (2) audience interaction, and (3) visual aids. It is this last channel upon which this chapter will focus.

In class, you will get to see a sample PowerPoint slideshow and hear the specifics about the structure of the slideshow and the types of visual evidence used. Underpinning these rules for a successful, audience-centered PowerPoint[1] presentation are four fundamental guidelines about using visual aids. They are the following:

Figure 1. The three components of the channel: you, audience interaction, and visual aids. Cartoon by Audrey Mora, 2014.

Fundamental Rule #1: Only Use Visual Aids When Needed

Of the three channels, visual aids comprise the only one that is optional in an audience-centered presentation, so the first step in creating a slideshow would be to decide when visual aids should be used. Here's the rule: visual aids should *only* be used when they either (1) aid in the audience's comprehension and/or memory, or (2) help to persuade the audience toward your intent.

As you plan your PowerPoint presentation, ask yourself if there is a visual that would help to illustrate the concept you are trying to explain. The visuals should *not* merely repeat what you are saying aloud. For instance, if you were running a sexual harassment training session, showing the participants a video of someone explaining what a "hostile work environment" is after you have just explained it yourself is repetitive and pointless. Showing visual examples of a hostile workplace, however, is useful. Keeping this idea in mind, let's look at the two usefulness rules more in depth:

1. ***Aiding in the Audience's Comprehension and/or Memory***

   When discussing complicated issues or matters tough to remember, using a visual channel in addition to your vocal channel can be extremely beneficial for the audience. If you were explaining on-campus shuttle routes to a group of incoming first-year Southern students, a map of the campus with each route highlighted would help the audience comprehend the message. If you needed to demonstrate the differences between the sales of two companies over the last fiscal year, a comparative line graph would be easier to grasp than merely listing off the sales numbers aloud.

[1] Though in this class we will be using Microsoft PowerPoint specifically, the term "PowerPoint" is used in this article to denote *any* presentational software (e.g., Google Slides, Prezi, Keynote, etc.), not just the program by Microsoft.

2. ***Helping to Persuade the Audience Toward Your Intent***

   The second way a visual aid could be beneficial is if it helps to persuade the audience toward your intent. When I was a middle-school kid way back when, D.A.R.E. (Drug Abuse Resistance Education) officers showed us lots of disturbing images, like pictures of mangled cars after drunk-driving accidents. We didn't really need to see pictures of smashed cars to know what car accidents look like. Those images were included in the hopes that they would persuade us—that they would shock us or sadden us enough to make us think twice about drinking and driving.

   Visual aids—particularly photographs—have the potential for a lot of "sticking power" (Standing et al., 1970); if they are impactful enough, audiences will remember them long after the presentation is done. Just be cautious in how you choose your persuasive visuals. Images that are too disturbing—the kind that make audiences immediately clamp their hands over their eyes or mentally shut down—probably won't have the impact you want. If your audience is trying hard to ignore the images on the screen and just find their mental happy place, you will have a hard time making your point effectively.

If something you want to put in your PowerPoint slideshow does not meet either of these criteria—that is, it neither aids in the audience's comprehension, nor does it aid in persuasion—then you should *not* include it. Period. If there is no visual to accompany a point you are trying to make, then show nothing. Don't add fluff. Or fillers. Or words. Or random clipart to fill space. Find useful visuals or simply don't use any. Anything else will merely detract from your message.

Fundamental Rule #2: Don't Make the Audience Think!

While visual aids can offer tremendous benefits toward audience understanding and persuasion, they also have the potential to pull focus away from what you are saying. When visuals are complicated or slides have multiple images per screen, audiences have to take time to process what they are seeing. While they are looking at the screen for that somewhat lengthy period of time, they will lose the ability to listen fully to what you are saying (Molloy et al., 2015). In other words, visuals should be a confirmation of what you're saying aloud and should be simple enough that audiences can look at the screen quickly, get the gist, and then turn their attention back to you.

The basic rule of thumb here comes from web designer Steve Krug (2014): "Don't make me think!" This is a guideline Krug employs when reviewing the design of different webpages, but certainly we can adapt this rule to apply to PowerPoint visuals by changing the words to echo Jerry Weissman's (2009) advice about storytelling: "Don't make *the audience* think." According to Krug, web pages (or, in our case, visuals) should be "self-evident. Obvious. Self-explanatory. [The audience] should be able to 'get it'—what it is and how to use it—without expending any effort thinking about it" (p. 25).

In terms of your visuals, this means that you need to do two things: (1) follow the time-tested advice to "Keep it simple, stupid," and (2) make sure your verbal and visual channels complement each other.

1. ***The KISS Rule: Keep It Simple, Stupid***

   The name-calling may be harsh, but the KISS rule is a basic creed of the graphic-design world. In your case, there are many ways you can keep your images simple and easy for your audience to digest mentally: remove unneeded data from charts and graphs, use only one picture per slide,

only show the relevant portions of a video clip, minimize the amount of parts and labels shown on a diagram, etc. Audiences should be able to process the gist of a visual on the screen within a few seconds. Make sure there are no extraneous parts or labels to distract the audience from their quick comprehension.

2. ***Coordinate Your Verbal and Visual Channels***

   To help your audience process what they are seeing on the screen, you need to keep the images relevant to what you are saying. In other words, you need the verbal channel (what you are saying) to complement the visual channel (what you are showing). This is particularly important because when the verbal and visual channels don't match, your audience's comprehension decreases (Baddeley, 2003). If, for instance, you were talking about the social benefits of a community garden, but your slide displayed a graph showing its potential monetary earnings, the audience would likely be confused and would expend mental energy trying to determine what the current topic is. To say it plainly, don't show a visual until you are ready to discuss and explain it; otherwise, your audience will spend too much time trying to decipher its meaning.

Fundamental Rule #3: Control the Audience's Focus

Even when visuals are kept simplistic, there is still the opportunity for your audience's mind to try to process parts of the visuals that you are not yet discussing. To the best of your ability, you should try to control the audience's focus; that is, you should try to ensure that all your listeners' attention is converged on the same part of your visual—the part that you are explaining.

For instance, let's say you're giving a speech to potential incoming Southern students, and you want to discuss dining services on campus. If you put a collage of all the logos of the different food options on the screen at once, audience members could each be focused on different areas—one could be looking at the Dunkin' logo, while another is wondering exactly what is grilled at The Grill, while yet another is trying to puzzle out what the heck a KiwiBot is. Instead, you could animate each logo so that it appeared one at a time on the screen as you described the food service. In this way, the audience would be able to follow along with you and know where to look, since you would shift their focus to each new dining option as its logo appeared.

Animation is certainly an effective way to control the audience's gaze, but there are additional ways to keep the audience focused as well. In in-person presentations, presenters can physically point to different areas on the visual to show the audience where to look. In virtual presentations, presenters can use PowerPoint tools like the marker or pointer to highlight relevant areas in real time, or they could add arrows or highlighted marks on the image as a part of the slideshow itself. The key is to keep the audience focused and on track as much as possible, so they can easily follow along with what you are saying and showing.

Fundamental Rule #4: No Bullet Points Allowed

That's right. *No. Bullet. Points. Allowed.* In fact, no text is allowed to explain your ideas on your evidence slides, whether you put a bullet point before it or not. Don't get me wrong: I love a good bullet point…on a résumé, in a brochure, in a report or memo, and in the readings you find on Blackboard each week, but ***not*** on a slide in a live presentation.

When I tell this rule to students—that no bullet points or written notes can appear on their PowerPoint slides—I'm often greeted with the kind of looks that imply that I enjoy making things difficult for them out of cruelty. Now while we all tend to have at least a little sadistic streak in us, that's not the reason for the rule. There are many academic and logical reasons why words should not act as evidence on presentation slides. So, without further ado: Wordy PowerPoints, how I hate thee. Let me count the ways:

1. **Wordy slides are selfish.** That's right. I said it. You put bullet points on a slide for *you*—the presenter—so that *you* don't have to bother learn what you're talking about. It's like presentation karaoke: you have all the words in front of you, and you just need to recite them as melodically as you can. Visual aids, though, are supposed to aid the *audience*. Showing them your notes on the screen doesn't help their understanding of the topic.
2. **Text-heavy slides don't follow the usefulness rules.** They neither aid the audience's comprehension and/or memory effectively, nor do they persuade anyone. Sorry, text, you just don't make the cut.
3. **Bullet points aren't a good use of the visual channel.** Visuals should be, you know…visual. There should be some aesthetic appeal. You can change the font, sure, but let's be real: words are just words.
4. **Word-filled slides don't follow the KISS rule.** Wordy slides are definitely stupid, so they get the last S right, but they are not simple. Unless you're presenting to a crowd of speed readers, the audience can't get the gist quickly and move on. Thus, those bullet points pull the audience's focus from what you are saying aloud for too long.
5. **Text-heavy slides stifle audience interaction and conversation.** Bullet points give the presentation a lecture quality, rather than an interactive one. Wordy slides are basically pseudo-scripts, and you already know that scripts are big presentation no-nos. As renowned sociologist and technology expert Sherry Turkle notes, a bullet-point-laden slideshow "is designed to close down debate, rather than open it up" (qtd. in Keller, 2003). That is exactly the opposite of the conversational feel you should be trying to foster in your presentations.
6. **Bullet points limit your eye contact.** It's tough to lock eyes and really pay attention to your audience when you're too busy reading off a screen.
7. **Bullet points are boring.** Visual aids should add something new to the presentation (a visual complement to the verbal channel); bullet points merely repeat what you are saying aloud.
8. **Text-heavy slides put you in a catch-22.** If you read the slides to the audience, that's insulting (like we can't read it ourselves?). If you stay silent so the audience can read it, things get awkward and your presentational flow is ruined. If you talk *about* the slides but don't actually read them, the audience will either read while you talk (thus ignoring you) or listen to you (thus ignoring the slides), and, as previously mentioned, comprehension goes down when the verbal and visual channels don't match.
9. **Bullet points make it hard for the audience to see the relationship between ideas.** The audience can't tell if the relationship is sequential, causal, or something else (Tufte, 2003). Everything just looks like a grocery list.

10. **Text-filled slides hurt your credibility.** I mean, how much of an expert can you really be if you have to rely on reading the information to your audience?
11. **Bullet points hurt your dynamism.** Read, click, pause. Read, click, pause. Read, click, pause. It's not exactly riveting, is it?
12. **Bullet points lack feeling.** As Seth Godin (2003) says, "Communication is the transfer of emotion." Bullet points and words as evidence don't have the same emotional power that images do, and thus they are an inferior communication channel.
13. **Bullet points fundamentally change the way you present knowledge.** They force you to boil down richly complex issues into "text bites" (Adams, 2007). Simplifying ideas for an audience is good, but oversimplifying them is a logical fallacy.
14. **Bullet points are overdone.** The moment the text comes up, the audience will get restless, awaiting yet another monotonous, read-along-with-me snooze fest. They've seen this same tedious presentation style play out many times before and will therefore lack the motivation to pay attention to you.

So, does this mean that no text can appear on your slides ever? No, of course not. There are some valid uses for words on slides: labels on graphs, headings, or previews and reviews of topics. But, let me be clear here: *no text should be used to explain any of your claims or arguments***.** Explaining is the job of the verbal channel. What gets shown on the screen should be *visual.*

Strong Fundamentals = Strong Slideshows

The above rules may seem a bit overwhelming, especially the last one, and I recognize that I am likely asking you to overhaul the way you have thus far approached and created PowerPoint presentations. I am also asking you to, in turn, recognize that the majority of the slideshows you have seen—and probably have even created yourself—have been, well…bad. PowerPoint has the potential to be an invaluable visual tool for your audience, but the platform (and others like it: Google Slides, Prezi, Keynote, etc.) is notorious for boring audiences to tears. PowerPoint is just a tool, though. A hammer can build a wall, or it can destroy it; it all depends on what the carpenter does with it. The same is true for PowerPoint: it can visually support your presentation and bring it to life, or it can deflate it the moment words pop up on the screen.

Remember AIMC. It's all about the audience, so try thinking like them. How many times have you truly enjoyed or been inspired to act by a slideshow covered with wordy bullet points or goofy clipart images? I'm guessing the answer is "no times." As a presenter, you won't connect with your audience with a bad PowerPoint presentation (heck, you may even struggle to keep them all awake). With one that follows the rules, though, and uses effective visuals, you can engage and interest your audience in ways that talking alone are difficult to do. Ultimately, adhering to these fundamental rules—and all the specific guidelines to follow—will turn your slideshows into vehicles for clearer and more impactful communication.

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